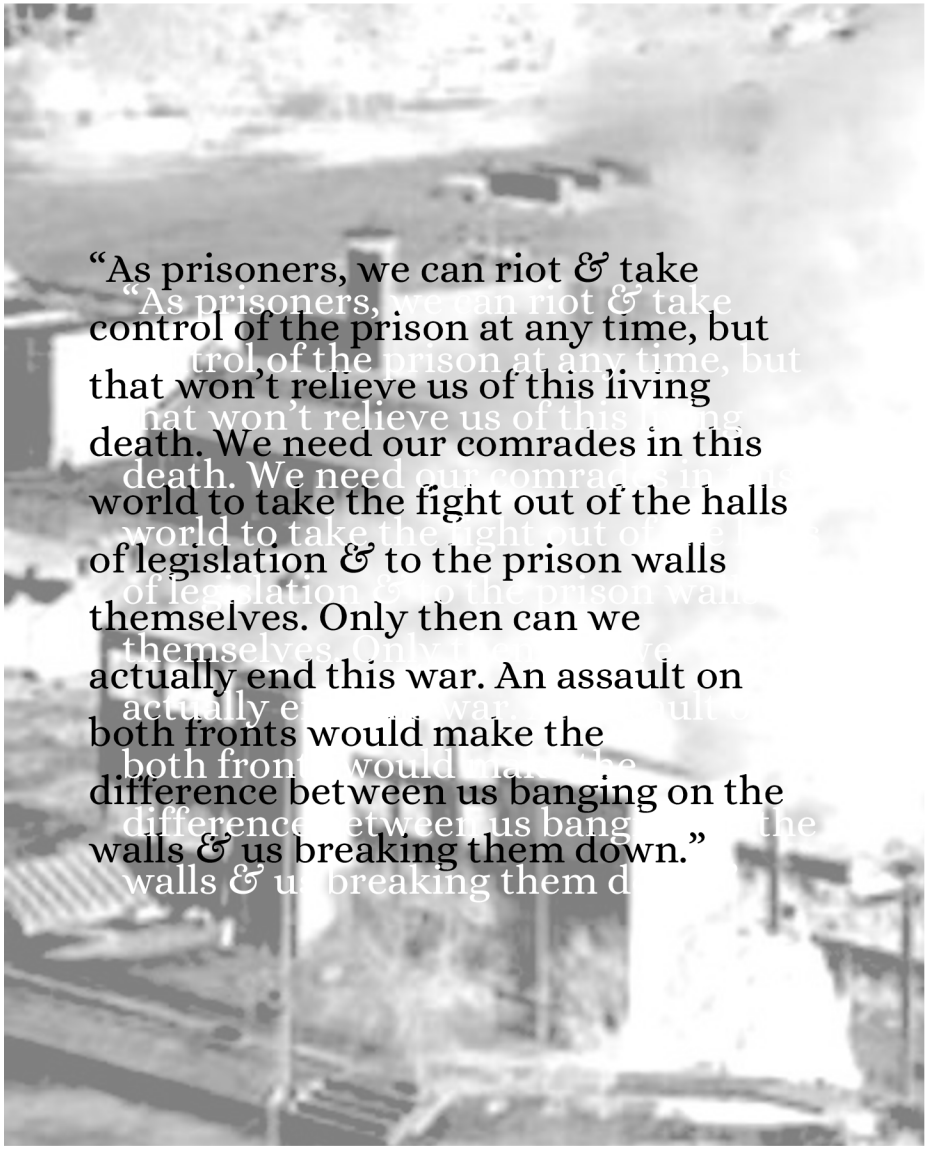
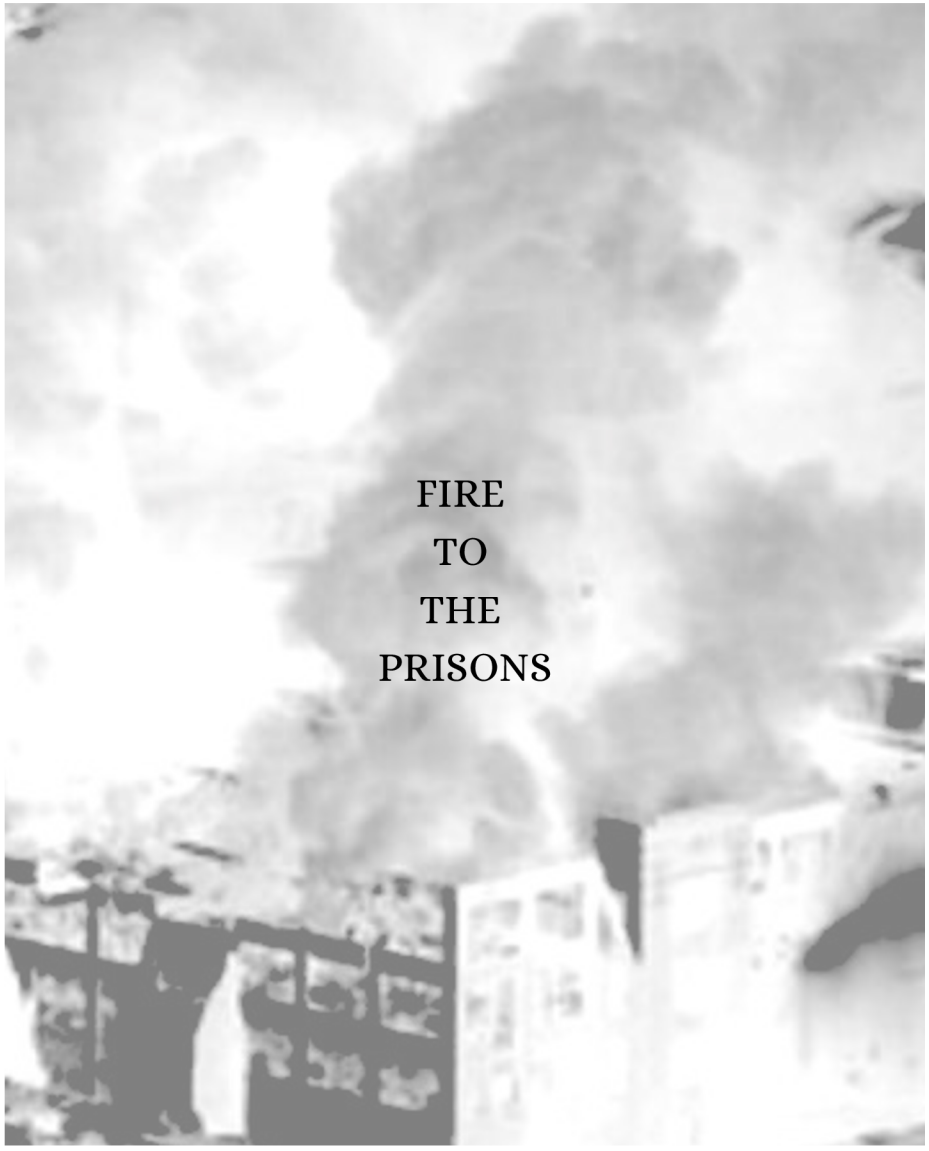
Prisoner Support As



"As prisoners, we can riot & take control of the prison at any time, but that won't relieve us of this living death. We need our comrades in this world to take the fight out of the halls of legislation & to the prison walls themselves. Only then can we actually end this war. An assault on both fronts would make the difference between us banging on the walls & us breaking them down."

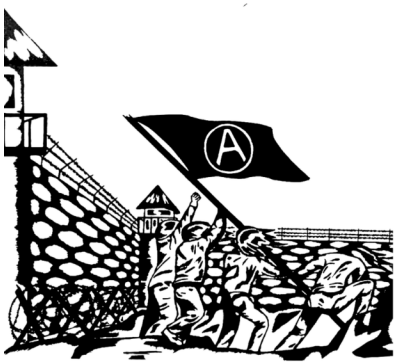


Insurrectional Method

“Prisoner Suport as Insurrectional Method,” Tinderbox

The following is based on a presentation given at the Pittsburgh Anti-Repression Convergence in June 2024.

with whatever weapons at hand



question (see abolitionstudy.com). This brings the conversation about prisoner support into conjunction with the latest conversations among anarchists of an insurrectionary persuasion about targets for attack (see for example "Is the Passion for Destruction a Creative Passion Too?" in Tinderbox #3). The authors of "Notes" write: "The targets of insurgent outside solidarity through sabotage [...] consists of everything and anything that upholds the reproduction of the prison facility itself or a DOC system from without." What specific institutions, logistical operations, contractors, and material infrastructure allow the functioning of a specific prison, or of the American prison system in general? Identifying these things allows comrades on the outside to attack and disrupt the prisons' functioning alongside movements on the inside. Moreover, it produces a shared analysis of how oppression operates that will be useful for all of us long after this specific struggle is over.

In general, the specific struggle around SCI Rockview has been notable in part because of how it's attempted to encourage escalated action among outside supporters, and challenges us to reimagine what prisoner support could look like. The authors of the text bring up important questions about how outside abolitionists do prisoner support, looking to "shift strategy from activism to insurgency." The authors write, "Are prisoners the only people expected to take risks? Are we just vessels of emotional support?"

This sentiment is echoed by a comrade accused of involvement in the SCI Rockview struggle from the inside, quoted in the same text: "As prisoners, we can riot & take control of the prison at any time, but that won't relieve us of this living death. We need our comrades in this world to take the fight out of the halls of legislation & to the prison walls themselves. Only then can we actually end this war. An assault on both fronts would make the difference between us banging on the walls & us breaking them down."

Anarchist and autonomist projects involving prisoners in the United States tend to fall into two categories. There's support for "political prisoners," i.e. people who are locked up for actions taken while part of a militant social movement or struggle, and support for "politicized" prisoners, meaning individuals who developed some kind of radical politics while they were already incarcerated. Anarchists' reasons for supporting political prisoners are not necessarily complicated; we have a responsibility to take care of our people when they get locked up. But when it comes to how to support politicized prisoners, our reasons for doing so often feel a lot less straightforward.

These kinds of projects, even when participants on both the inside and the outside have revolutionary politics, tend to follow what some call "legalistic" or "procedural" methods (see "Tasting Abolition" by Rustbelt Abolition Radio, 2020). That is, they try to make changes by using the official, legal channels offered to us by the system. By working tirelessly to mitigate some of the worst of the state's oppressiveness, these projects genuinely help people and are valuable in themselves. But do they move us towards anarchy? Do they give more people more experience with anarchist ideas and methods (as opposed to reformist ones)? And if all parties involved share some kind of insurrectionary politics, why water these down? Why should insurrectionary methods be confined to struggles on the outside?

The reasons for this are many. Sometimes some of the individuals involved do not actually have the politics they purport to. Opportunism is rampant on both sides of the fence. Anarchists and other militants doing these kinds of support projects often overlook significant political incompatibilities with the prisoners they support, whether out of a feeling that it's important to defer to individuals who are more oppressed by the system, or white guilt, or tokenism, whether consciously or not. Often it's white people who end up deferring or downplaying a militant politic to POC or Black liberals because of their shame about the whiteness of their milieus and subcultures. Rather than examining why this whiteness exists and making efforts to change it, this turns it into a self-defeating prophecy.

Moreover, it's not clear how insurrectionary methods could be applied in a prison-centered struggle without subjecting people who are locked up to extremely severe repression. A great deal of trust and consent must

therefore be involved between people on the inside and outside, and this means a lot of time, effort, and dedication. The process of organizing across prison walls also subjects outside organizers to significant exposure to state repression, since phone calls, emails, letters, and video visits with incarcerated comrades are all monitored and recorded. In-person visits and creative approaches to communication can be beneficial in mitigating this, but again these workarounds involve significant time and dedication.

Lastly, in our experience, our politicized comrades on the inside are often unfamiliar with the kinds of actions that many insurrectionary anarchists in the "free world" are willing to take. Most people who write prisoners and offer to help have liberal politics and their imagination of what this help would look like are confined to procedural methods. This means that insurgent prisoners often water down their ideas or ask for certain kinds of help from outside supporters because they assume that we are all activists and want to do activism with them. It's important that those of us who want to pursue more insurrectionary methods are really clear about this and can clearly explain what this looks like for us, especially since subcultural and political difference between politicized prisoners and outside anarchists make miscommunication a frequent possibility. Again, because of the constraints of communication and increased risks of repression, the odds are all against our ability to do this. But that doesn't mean it's impossible.

So far we've argued that it's possible, and desirable, for those of us who are already involved in abolitionist prisoner support to pursue these kinds of projects through insurrectionary methods. But let's backtrack for a moment and take up another angle on this topic, because it's also possible, and desirable, for anarchists who are already committed to insurrectionary methods out here to expand their struggles to politicized prisoners.

Social insurrectionaries understand that our goals involve trying to build a broader culture of revolt and resistance that exists outside of an anarchist or radical milieu. The specific struggle, discussed in Issue #1 of Tinderbox, originated outside the United States as a way for insurrectionary anarchists to focus on a particular project while attempting to build this kind of broader culture. The point is not necessarily to stop a particular bad thing from happening, but to agitate

additional repression after the trials; and in general outside supporters developed long-term relationships with the defendants. This is arguably the most important part, because those relationships of trust enable everything else, and open up a world of possibility for future collaboration.

The editors of "United We Stood," a 2021 zine that compiles writing and analysis from V17 defendants, write in the preface that, "The writings in this zine come from captive revolutionaries whose analysis, experience, and abilities extend so far beyond what most radicals on the outside have dared to explore. Struggles out here against authority have a lot to learn form prisoners' experiences on the inside. Bringing these two very different insurrectionary currents together has the potential to enrich us all in unimaginable ways, open up our vision, threaten the State, and bring us closer to collective liberation."

In retrospect, considering the example of the V17 uprising, what else would have been possible if there had been dedicated anarchist support on the outside from the beginning? The prisoners involved in that uprising risked their lives and expected to make enormous sacrifices; they were serious about pursuing freedom. Are we?

A more recent example is the struggle around SCI Rockview in Pennsylvania that began this past December, which to our knowledge is the first instance of a team-up between prisoners and outside supporters that was explicitly explored, at least by some of its participants, as a "specific struggle." Racism, abuse, and death are longstanding issues at SCI Rockview. The incident that precipitated organized action by incarcerated comrades this past winter was when guards hung up nooses in one of the tiers. As outside supporters got involved and prisoners were transferred and/or put in solitary in retaliation for organizing, the struggle expanded, with many of the participants attempting to move beyond specific demands (for the firing of the officers involved, for example) to more general agitation against the prison and the infrastructure that supports it.

The text "Notes on abolitionist insurgency & prisoner support in Pennsylvania," which was written in March in connection with the struggle at SCI Rockview, points out the importance of broadening the terrain of struggle against prisons beyond the site of the specific facility in

Another former defendant writes about that night:

> "So while looking around, I seen something beautiful. All the prisoners were working together to make sure that no one was without. People who never spoke to each other before were checking on each other to make sure everyone was good. The lines that separated us were erased for at least that one day. Another thing was seeing the face of calm on some of the prisoners. You have to realize that there were people in the building that day who have been systematically tortured for DECADES! But on that one day, they were free. They had no fear of the whip of the overseers. They all knew it would be short lived, but it was a reprieve from the boot on their necks that they felt on a daily basis. You seen people who haven't smiled in YEARS laughing like children. That was huge! Another memory that I will never forget is hearing the realization of our TRUE reality from the people that I considered previously lost. Something that I spoke on for years was the fact that we are only incarcerated because we choose to be. If we as whole were willing to sacrifice, we could TAKE our freedom back. We outnumber the overseers 30 to 1. People finally seen the reality of those words. Another positive take from that is the overseers also realized that. So after that day, some of the most oppressive overseers became some of the most respectful. They realized that they didn't have the level of immunity that they previously thought. They realized that there were still some warriors amongst the broken who hadn't forgot who they were." (Alejandro Rodriguez-Ortiz ["Kaona"], *V17 Speaks*)

From the standpoint of outside supporters who joined the struggle later once the 17 defendants had been indicted and were standing trial, allying themselves in a joined struggle like this was transformative in many senses. Showing up at court during the trials demonstrated significant support for the defendants; more resources were distributed to more insurgents; there was dedicated support as the former defendants faced

around it in such a way that builds alliances between different networks of insurgents and gives more people experience with anarchist methods.

These methods are based on direct action and autonomy, meaning they are also against any kind of representation. Unlike a lot of activists approaches in the U.S., there's no dialogue with people in power, like politicians, administrators,, or mainstream media. It doesn't include legalistic approaches, like filing lawsuits or signing petitions, because part of the point of the specific struggle is to spread anarchist practices. This method focuses on individuals taking initiative to engage inn violent and self-organized struggle. If we hold true to these methods and refuse the allure of media and political representation, this kind of struggle can give us experiences that really change our lives and what we understand to be possible.

Furthermore, this is an "insurrectional" method, in that it seeks to deepen our collective capacities with an eye toward how we might contribute to future moments of broader social unrest. This method seeks to develop some of the skills, alliances, and practices of self-organization and attack that can deepen moments of popular uprising and move them towards an insurrectionary break with authority. This is the insurrectionary hypothesis: that specific projects that we take up here and now, alongside other non-anarchists who hate the same things we do, can deepen and spread anarchy in those bigger moments down the road.

So the question is, can we approach outside support for prisoner resistance as a specific struggle? And why attempt to apply this kind of method to prisoner support in the first place?

In the United States, racial and class segregation present significant obstacles to insurgency. We can either ignore this fact or try to figure out how to deal with it. The prison, if we consider it as an institution specifically intended for the disposal and isolation of some of this country's most racially and economically oppressed populations, thus becomes a very significant site for building alliances. Pursuing a specific struggle alongside incarcerated people, following this logic, also helps undermine part of the point of mass incarceration in this country, which is to maintain segregation between different insurgent populations and keep many of the individuals with the most reasons (and abilities) to rebel out of struggles in the streets. We can take up what we usually feel is a

chilling barrier to people taking risks against domination –– the U.S.'s long prison sentences and severe justice system –– and see the advantages this might present for struggle.

This might sound counterintuitive, and even a little problematic, but we are thinking for example of the rebellion at James T. Vaughn Correctional Center in Delaware in 2017, known as the Vaughn 17 or V17 uprising, which we'll discuss in depth here as an inspiration for what a prison-centered specific struggle can look like. This uprising was arguably possible specifically because of long prison sentences. The prisoners involved already had many years of experience countering abusive conditions in the prison. More importantly, though, it meant that prisoners who already had life sentences essentially had nothing to lose.

According to what was attested to at trial and reported on by Unicorn Riot and other journalists, approximately six prisoners took over a building at JTVCC by coming back into the building from the yard, after recreation. They walked back in wearing masks, and, in pairs, fought each of the three guards on duty and put them in separate closets. At the same time, an additional prisoner went to the office of the counselor, who was the only other employee in the building, secured her there and made sure she was safe for the duration of the uprising. Clothes and the rest of the crime scene were then burned or bleached, and the tier was flooded with water, which mixed everyone's DNA together over the rest of the day. The police were unable to recover any relevant DNA from the scene except from one of the defendants, which did not result in a conviction for him.

Prisoners held the building for 19 hours, until the cops broke down a wall with a backhoe; as the state retook the building, they found one of the prison guards dead. During the time in which the building was held, one of the self-identified leaders among the prisoners tried to speak with the governor of Delaware and make a list of demands heard. The prisoners all shared food and made sure individuals with medical issues were taken care of. Although the media portrayed the uprising as a "riot," implying that it was spontaneous, random, and violent just for the sake of being violent, in reality it was a highly organized and well-planned attack on the prison from within.

The uprising was well planned in that, as we already mentioned, according to testimony at trial, the coordinated attack on the guards and the takeover of the building was conducted in a way that preserved everyone's anonymity. The state eventually charged 18 prisoners, but was not able to produce any hard evidence against almost anyone. Despite the state of Delaware's attempts to reinstate the death penalty for this case, seventeen of the defendants refused to cooperate with the state and came together to fight the case collectively. In planning the attack, those prisoners that had been involved had also planned in advance for repression, anticipating what they'd be charged with and what their defense would be. The prosecution had nothing to base their case on except snitch testimony and what certain individuals chose to take responsibility for, and as a result they lost their trials against everyone except those individuals, and had to drop the charges against the remaining defendants.

Although it wasn't called that, the uprising and building takeover gave more people an experience of something like anarchy, or freedom from authority: autonomous, violent direct action; mutual aid that was actually mutual; methods of pursuing struggles that rely on ourselves and build out our capacities instead of going through the state. One of the V17 defendants writes of the takeover:

> "No matter how long I reflect on that night, it always seems to amaze me how everyone was able to come together. I've spent the majority of my teens and adult life in prison and I've never seen people come together in that way. No matter the color, belief, or gang someone was apart of, they all made sure no one did without. It's wild, no food was brought to that building, but yet everyone ate. People at random just started offering the less fortunate food, it gave me a whole new understanding of what solidarity is. There was people just walking around checking and making sure everyone was good. Despite what the media and the agents of the state tried to portray that night to be, it wasn't a riot. A group of guys came together and took action, which in turn sparked the fire that laid dormant in so many, that were victims of the department of corrections' torture." (John Bramble, *V17 Speaks*)